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ABSTRACT

A study in a small rural school district used district preassessment records of students referred for a comprehensive, special education evaluation to determine if preassessment practices had improved. The district was located in a midwestern state that mandated preassessment practices in the mid-1980s in an effort to control special education referrals and maintain more students in the general classroom. A subject pool of 48 educators was provided with actual preassessment forms completed by school-based preassessment teams for the 1996-97 school year. General information on referrals was collected as well as reasons for referral and suggested interventions. Preassessment teams serve two clear functions: to support students experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties and to monitor the referral of students for special education evaluations. The teams in this study appeared to address both these functions, but with limited success. Preassessment records showed regular team meetings, documentation of suggested classroom interventions, and a regulated system of referrals for special education assessment. However, there were qualitative concerns about team membership and involvement of key stakeholders, duration of attention given to students at the preassessment level, team proficiency in pinpointing student problems, and the efficacy of team-suggested interventions. Contains 15 references and lists of preassessment team interventions suggested for the areas of speech and language, math, reading, written language, motor, and general achievement. (CDS)

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PREASSESSMENT TEAM PRACTICES IN RURAL SETTINGS: AN ANALYSIS OF TEAM ACTIVITIES

General and special education practitioners have been challenged to support increasing numbers of children with disabilities in general classrooms (Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Will, 1986). This need for including students emerged in response to concerns about segregating children with disabilities from their nondisabled peers, questions regarding the efficacy of special education, and concerns about the increasing expense of serving growing percentages of students with mild handicaps in special education programs. Experts have recommended that educators examine the effectiveness of available provisions to accommodate children who are failing in the regular classroom (Kauffman, Gerber, & Semmel, 1988; Nevin & Thousand, 1986). In response to this continuing problem, over the past two decades, schools have instituted a variety of programs and procedures. Direct service programs that offer school-based support include Title I reading and math programs, tutoring programs, mentor programs, and teacher-generated assignments modifications.

Nearly all schools have also implemented programs that offer support to the teacher through consulting teacher teams referred to variously as preassessment, prereferral, teacher assistance, or student assistance teams. The primary purpose of preassessment is to provide general educators with support and preliminary intervention to facilitate the success of students who are experiencing learning and/or behavior problems in the general education classroom, thereby reducing the numbers of students who require comprehensive evaluations to determine whether they need special education services (Bay, Bryan, & O'Connor, 1994; Carter & Sugai, 1989; Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Reeder, Gilman, Fernstrom, & Roberts, 1990; Graden, Casey, & Bonstrom, 1985). The major benefit derived from preassessment interventions is maintenance of more students in the general classroom and less time spent on unnecessary evaluations (Harrington & Gibson, 1986). Because 681,500 professional hours and $9,715,(100 in professional salaries were spent annually in a single state for school comprehensive special education evaluations (Honeycutt, 1988), the practical result of effective preassessment procedures would be considerable. Moreso, effective preassessment activities would reduce the negative school experience of those children who are not successful in the general curriculum.

Preassessment is a relatively common practice in the field of education. Most states currently require preassessment procedures but, to date, there is limited empirical evidence to indicate that preassessment is effective (Carter & Sugai, 1989; Myles, Simpson, & Ormsbee, 1996; Ormsbee, Myles, & Simpson, in press). Preassessment teams have many functions including clarifying student problems, developing behavioral interventions, identifying instructional and management goals, and recommending curriculum modifications. (Adelman, 1996; Graden, Casey, & Bonstrom, 1985; Ormsbee, Myles, & Simpson, in press). More specifically, these collaborative teams offer general educators assistance in accessing school services and provide a system for collegial problem-solving (Pugach & Johnson, 1995).

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In an early study predating most state mandates, Chalfant, Pysh, and Moutrie (1979) found that preassessment teams reduced special education referrals by 63.5% in an Illinois school district. Graden, Casey, and Bonstrom (1985) investigated preassessment practices in six schools located in a large suburban school district. In four schools, special education placements were reduced dramatically (60% - 77%) following the implementation of a preassessment program. In two schools, preassessment resulted in no reduction of special education placements.

Several studies have looked at preassessment procedures and effectiveness through the perceptions of general and special educators. In several surveys of teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of preassessment, overall educators have indicated they were satisfied with preassessment teams and that the teams offered appropriate interventions (Harrington & Gibson, 1986; Myles, Simpson, & Ormsbee, 1996). However, teacher reaction was mixed as to whether the preassessment team assisted in alleviating problems.

Cooley, McVey, and Barrett-Jones (1988) reported wide variability in the way preassessment was implemented in nine midwestern school districts. These researchers reviewed referral information for students with learning, behavior and/or speech/language problems in the regular classroom, the degree to which preassessment strategies were implemented, and how they were documented. Using descriptive data, the report identified effective preassessment practices as including (a) accurate description of students' problems, (b) interventions directly related to presenting problems, and (c) observational data on intervention outcomes. Based on data collected the study made a number of recommendations, including:

1. Preassessment teams, especially referring teachers, need to be trained to diagnose the student's problem more accurately and specifically.

2. Preassessment teams, especially classroom teachers, need to b e better trained regarding effective interventions within the classroom...

3. Preassessment teams need to b e trained to evaluate the effect that interventions have on student performance (p. 205).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine if preassessment practices have improved in districts. District preassessment records of students referred for a comprehensive, special education evaluation were reviewed to collect data regarding reasons for referral to the team, the types of intervention designed, and evaluation procedures for determining intervention effectiveness.

The purpose of this study was to describe the preassessment team activities and strategies for meeting the needs of students with learning and behavioral problems in general classrooms. Preassessment records for students referred to building teams were reviewed to identify the reasons students were referred, information collected by teams and used for intervention design, interventions developed in response to referral problems, and monitoring activities.

METHOD

District information

A small, rural school district participated in this study. This district was located in a midwestern state that mandated preassessment practices in the mid 1980's in an effort to control special education referrals and maintain more students in the general classroom. Student population is approximately 7,300 students, with 18 sites (10 elementary, 6 middle/junior high schools, and 2 high schools). Extreme ethnic diversity is a major factor in this district. In particular, this district's ethnic breakdown is Caucasian (49%), Hispanic (44%), Asian/Pacific Islander (5%), African American (.05%), American Indian/Alaska

Native (.05%). Another element of diversity is the relatively high rate of poverty in the district as reflected in a 40% free/reduced lunch rate. Nearly 14% of students in the district are provided special education services. The ethnic breakdown for those students is comparable to overall district profile: Caucasian (47%), Hispanic (49%), Asian (2%), and African American (2%).

Participants

The subject pool consisted of 48 educators who were assigned or volunteered to serve on their building's preassessment team for the 1997-98 school year. The pool was comprised of a diverse group of educators that included elementary school teachers, special educators, specialty subjects, school counselors, school psychologists, building principals and school nurses. Individuals were distributed across age, averaging 41 years old. There was a range in teaching assignments, the largest number of respondents were regular education teachers, 25 in all. There were 4 were school counselors and only 3 principals in the sample. Six of the teachers were in bilingual education, 3 were Title 1 Reading, and 2 Librarians were included. There were one each in the categories of administrator, school nurse, selfcontained special education teacher, and physical education instructor. One person in the sample declined to state their teaching assignment. Overall the team members had an average of 15 years of teaching experience and almost one-half reported being certified in more than one teaching area. The sample was 87% women, not unusual for a largely elementary school sample.

The primary team members, in order of most often represented; included classroom teachers (one-fourth had assignments in bilingual programs), school counselors, and school principals. A few teams reported having members who represented nursing, school psychology, library, and Title II programs. Most schools either used a volunteer method (65%) of staffing the preassessment team. Other schools used a rotation system (4%), were assigned to the team by the building principal (15%), or some other method (4%) for determining preassessment team membership; twelve percent did not report a specific method for filling preassessment team positions.

Parents and students were not consistently active in the preassessment process. Parent notification of preassessment activities occurred about 40% of the time, with parents actually invited to team meetings only 20% of the time. Students were involved in preassessment activities at even lower rates, with notification of meetings and invitation to attend occurring only17% of the time.

Instrumentation

A date collection form was developed to assist in recording information when reviewing student records. The form provided a place to assign each student a number to protect anonymity and space to record preassessment team and comprehensive, special education evaluation information. A data collection form was completed on each case and used later for analysis.

Procedures

Data collectors were provided with the actual preassessment forms completed by school-based preassessment teams for the 1996-97 school year. Those forms are filed with and housed in the special education office of the district separately from students' special education folders. Information obtained from the files was transferred to a data form to facilitate uniform collection of information.

Data collectors reviewed files over the course of six months in seven sessions to accommodate ongoing evaluations. To collect this data, preassessment reports were pulled and the student was assigned a number, thereafter, the number was used in considering collected information.

RESULTS

General Referral Information

Preassessment activities for the year 1997-98 resulted in 243 students brought before building teams for in class assistance. Of those students discussed by the team, more than one-half (58%) were referred for a comprehensive, special education evaluation, resulting in 85 (60%) students being found eligible for special education services. The median grade at the time of referral for students was 2nd grade. The majority of students were identified for speech/language services (65%), the next highest category was learning disabilities (23%), gifted/talented (8%), and behavior disorders (4%) made up the rest of the students.

Team functioning information was also gathered. Specifically, the number of meetings that were held per referral was collected. Preassessment reports indicated that in almost 60% of the cases the teams met two times concerning a student problem. In one-third of the cases, the teams met just once before either closing the case or referring for testing. In just 1% of the cases, the teams did not meet at all before completing a referral for special education assessment. In contrast, in 1% of the cases, the teams met three times to discuss a student's school performance. Finally, 7% of the preassessment reports did not contain information that noted the number of team meetings.

Information was collected regarding the length of time it took for a student to move through the system from the preassessment point to placement in a special education program. On average, students who eventually were referred to special education assessment were placed in special education programs after 90 days. This included the time spent on general class interventions. It is important to note that the state suggested duration of general class interventions is 6 to 8 weeks.

Reasons for Referral

Records were also reviewed to determine the reason students were brought before to the preassessment team's attention. Referral reasons were categorized in major domains of school functioning or subject area. Reasons for referral included: (a) articulation problems (31%), (b) language/literacy deficits (24%), (c) general poor academics (20%), (d) no reason (19%), (e) inappropriate behavior (3%), (f) math/counting deficits (2%), and (g) motor skill deficits (1%)

Suggested Interventions

Figure 1 is a listing of the most often suggested intervention s for helping students who were brought to the preassessment team. The lists are organized from the most frequently suggested intervention to the least frequently suggested intervention. In general, records did not include individual child data to reflect the efficacy of interventions, the duration of the intervention implementation, or the evaluation procedures used to measure student progress.

DISCUSSION

Preassessment teams serve two clear functions: to support students who are experiencing learning and/or behavioral difficulties and to monitor the referral of students for special education evaluations. The preassessment teams represented in this study appeared to be addressing both of those charges; however, with limited success. While the preassessment records showed regular team meetings, documentation of suggested classroom interventions, and a regulated system of referrals for special education assessment; there were some qualitative concerns with regard to the preassessment team membership and involvement of key stakeholders, duration of attention given to students at the preassessment level, the proficiency of the team to pinpoint student problems, and the efficacy of team-suggested interventions.

One issue operating in the role of preassessment teams studied here is that special education faculty and staff were not members of the preassessment team. Additionally, the parents of students identified for concern and the students themselves were rarely involved in the process of participating in selection or implementation of intervention strategies. It seems input from key informants (special education teachers, parents and identified students) would enhance the efficacy of team activities.

Review of preassessment records revealed that teams and teachers seemed to expend limited energy on intervention activities before considering special education options. Of great interest was the time that was dedicated to implementing interventions in the general classroom before considering special education options. In the majority of cases, the records indicated two or fewer meetings to develop interventions and monitor implementation per student. These meetings often occurred within a two-week time frame, resulting in less than 10 school days being committed to an intervention. Given that many learning and behavioral problems are persistent and often intense, it would seem logical that a two week intervention plan is destined to fail, simply because it wasn't given adequate time. Moreover, most experts in the educational field recognize that behavioral changes occur slowly and often subtly.

There was no record of preassessment teams redefining the student's problems in behavioral terms or to refine teacher's referral comments to make the presenting problem one that was precise enough to match an empirically-supported intervention. That is, records review found that the teacher's report of the student's problem was often used as the sole focus by the team and often contained very general, subjective statements of the student's difficulties. No baseline of student functioning could be established and indeed no data on individual student performance was noted in the records reviewed. Moreover, these statements were, by and large, not specific enough to support any credible matching of a treatment. It is unclear whether these teachers were unaware that this was an important step in the preassessment process or simply lacked the training to do this.

A related concern regarding the preassessment teams' response to student problems was the suggested interventions. As shown in Figure 1, all of the interventions documented in the preassessment records were poorly defined, and of limited power to address any of the referral problems presented. Because documentation of the intervention effectiveness was absent in all of the records, it is unclear how students responded to these interventions. But from a researcher's point of view, it would seem that the interventions suggested by the preassessment teams were superficial at best.

However, it is clear to note that despite our misgivings regarding the possible efficacy of those interventions, the building teams did seem to meet the second charge of preassessment; to monitor the referral of students for special education evaluations. Referrals for special education evaluations were held to 58% with only about 35% of the original group of preassessed students actually being placed in special education. This rate of testing and identification is comparable to previous study in the state that this district is located that reported a 60% special education referral rate. Unfortunately, there is little known about those students who did not qualify for special education. That is, we don't know if the interventions suggested by the preassessment team were continued, if the teacher came back to the team for additional support, or if the teacher simply went back to his/her classroom and was able to successfully meet the student's needs independently.

Interpretation of these results are dependent on the stated purpose of preassessment teams. They are not intended to be a fast track to special education, though Chalfant & Van Dusen Pysh (1981) found that team members rated their efficiency as a referral vehicle as a positive for some. The same research indicated that the team functioned as a barrier to special education placement. This suggests an ambiguity of purpose that can only be clarified through further research.

Despite the existence of state mandates for general education attention before special education options are considered, interest in preassessment continues to be limited. Very few studies have been published in the area of preassessment, its efficacy and effective models for this process. In light of the continued emphasis on inclusive classrooms for students with learning and behavioral difficulties it would seem logical that preassessment should be viewed as a critical support mechanism for teachers. Particularly in rural schools where funds for student services are often limited.

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Figure 1 Suggested Preassessment Team Interventions

Speech/Language
- provide model of sounds/words
- instruct on tongue placement
- provide 1-step directions
- label class items
- encourage slower speech
- provide peer tutoring
- have student retell a story

Math
- provide 1:1 instruction
- drill math facts

Reading
- provide peer tutors
- use computer programs
- provide paraprofessional tutoring
- use taped stories
- reduce vocabulary requirements
- pretest on ending sounds
- drill daily on phonics
- practice reading orally
- use picture cues
- teach Dolch sightwords
- allow peer reading
- listen to tape of sounds
- use clay to form letters
- repeat oral/written directions
- write vowel patterns across paper
- use Rebus stories
- use study guides

Written Language
- practice writing letters
- use narrow lined paper
- use different chalk colors on board
- model notetaking system

Motor
- provide pencil grip
- use paper with distinct lines
- teach fingertip exercises

General Achievement
- provide after school tutoring
- provide peer tutoring
- use index cards for studying
- provide oral tests
- provide copies of notes
- contact parents
- allow students to retake tests
- have student repeat directions
- use cooperative learning
- practice fine motor skills
- use touch control
- prepare weekly progress reports
- modify curriculum
- provide extra practice homework
- monitor work completion
- touch student before giving directions
- have paraprofessional use close proximity